

An eighteenth-century amputation scene in the men's operating theatre of old St Thomas's Hospital

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Introduction

Some 10 years ago I published in the *Annals*¹ an article about a painting of an operation scene that had been acquired by the College in 1965. The article was called 'The Good Old Days, an operation in the 1740s'. I have now obtained much more information about this painting and I think this knowledge should be placed on permanent record.

The painting

First of all there is the question about the possible date. I suggested the 1740s because of a comment from the Victoria and Albert Museum that from the costumes it was painted during the 1740s but 'it is perhaps not possible to allocate it to an exact decade'. Dr Burgess of the Wellcome Museum considered that it was a work of the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and from certain internal

evidence I think this is exactly correct. In fact it was almost certainly painted in 1775 or 1776.

In the earlier article I speculated about the possible site of the operating theatre depicted. If in England, it appeared to be at one of the London hospitals with a large enough medical school to have a tiered gallery and students. It is now certain that it depicts a scene in the men's operating theatre of the old St Thomas's Hospital, when it was in the Borough and formed one of the 'United Borough Hospitals' together with Guy's.

The painting (Fig. 1) was bought by the College at Sotheby's, to whom it had been submitted for an opinion by Mr C M Craig, of Lowestoft. It is a stark, unpleasant subject and clearly is unlikely to be popular with many people, although it has great value as a historic 'document'—even more so now that



FIG. 1 *The oil painting acquired by the College.*

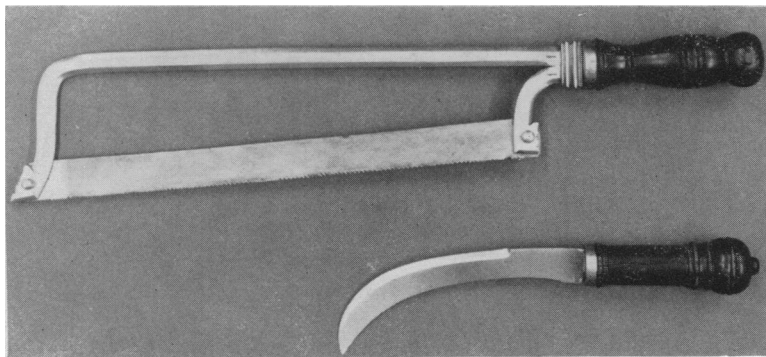


FIG. 2 *A knife and saw of the type shown in the painting and also on display in the College.*

we know more about it. Mr Craig tells me that he had bought it many years ago from a dealer whom he did not even know and who had acquired it from the King's Lynn area. Originally it was unframed and very dirty and 'had come to light hanging on the solid wall of a farm house when they were demolishing a lath and plaster wall in front of it'. After being cleaned and framed in Norwich it hung on the wall of the surgeons' room at Lowestoft Hospital because it was not considered a suitable decoration for a modern home. The man from whom the picture was bought was an itinerant antique dealer who has died. He could have bought it 'anywhere in East Anglia'.

In my original account of the painting I made some comments that may be relevant.

'The painting is a pictorial record or document of surgery at that time and it would be wrong for the College not to possess and display it as a piece of evidence of things as they used to be and of the progress that has been made. . . . The surgeon is clearly shown using the so-called "tour de maître", the motion of circular amputation that could be done so swiftly. The knife he is using is specially designed for this purpose, and a late 17th century knife of the same type is displayed in a case in the entrance hall of the College [Fig. 2], one that was restored after being badly damaged when the College was bombed and set on fire. With it is an amputation saw such as is also shown. The instruments readily to hand on a low table are accurate and include a pair of bone-grasping forceps. The large basin of water below the limb should be

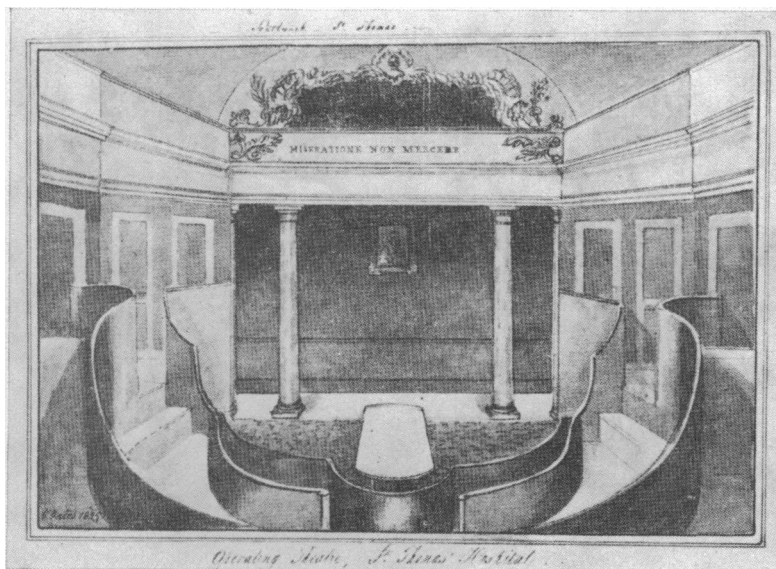


FIG. 3 *The watercolour by G Yates of the men's operating theatre of St Thomas's Hospital in 1825.*

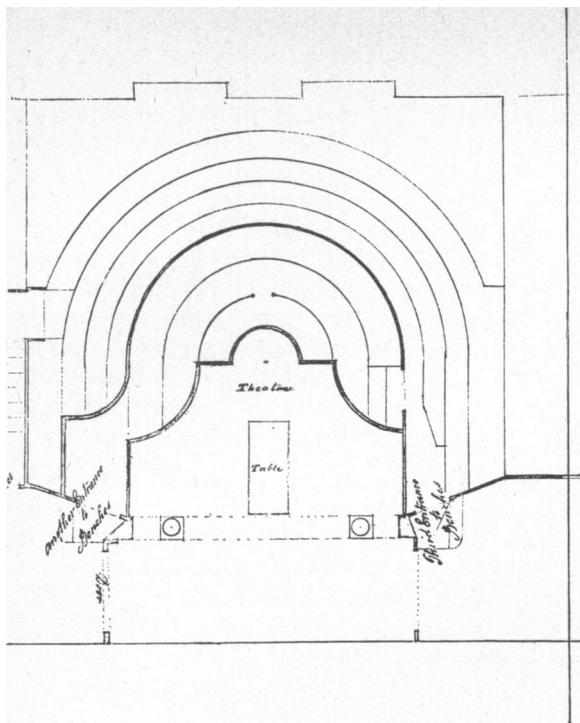


FIG 4. Floor plan of the St Thomas's Hospital men's operating theatre as submitted to Kingston Assizes when the Guy's students were charged with assault.

noted; sometimes a box of sawdust was used. On the limb is a classical screw type of tourniquet, counterparts of which can always be seen in the boxes of surgical instruments used at that time and especially by the army or navy. The low operating table is accurate as also is its position facing the on-lookers in the railed standings. The surgeon has taken off his frock coat and wears a carpenter's type of apron; also accurate.

'The group of spectators crowded round the table was usual and among them can be seen a typical 18th century physician wearing a wig and holding his gold-headed cane to his nose. Such a cane was carried almost as a wand of office by the consulting physician. It was usually of considerable length and was provided with a knob or a bar containing a vinaigrette which was held to the nose to ward off noxious vapours arising from the sick room. The painting shows clearly the way in which it was customarily held.'

I commented that the black man with startled eyes is doubtless not a student but perhaps a body servant of the unfortunate man on the table. The identity of this black

man is fundamental to the whole scene, but before embarking on this we should deal with the actual site of the operating theatre. It is certain that it is the men's theatre of old St Thomas's Hospital. Figure 3 shows the well-known watercolour of this theatre painted by G Yates in 1825 but does little to identify the scene for certain. This is shown from the floor plan in Figure 4, which can be correlated exactly with Figure 1 and Figure 3. Of particular relevance is the presence and position of the Doric column shown to one side and near the foot of the table. This also enables us to place the table in its relationship to the rest of the proscenium.

It will be remembered that it was in the men's operating theatre that in 1836 occurred the sensational fight between students and others of St Thomas's Hospital and students of Guy's Hospital, whose customary time-honoured attendance at the St Thomas's theatre had been forbidden by the Governors because of the dispute that had arisen between the two hospitals. As a consequence of this fight the police were called in; nine Guy's students were arrested and subsequently appeared at Kingston Assizes and were bound over. The plan of the operating theatre was submitted in evidence at the hearing and is presumably therefore substantially correct. It was kindly provided by Mr T H E Orde, archivist to Guy's Hospital.

Omai

The next question is the identity of the black man in the front row who has such a startled expression. I believe he is a Polynesian native called Omai or alternatively Omiah. He is described as coming from Otaheite (Tahiti), but it is also stated that he did not come from Tahiti but one of the neighbouring islands—Huaheine or Ulatea. He was brought to England in July 1774 by Captain Furneaux returning from Captain Cook's second voyage. This voyage began in July 1772 and was completed by Cook in July 1775, but Captain Furneaux left Cook and returned to England in Cook's sister ship the *Adventure* in July 1774, bringing Omai with him.

In Cook's *Voyages of Discovery* it is established that Cook wondered that Captain

Fourneau should encumber himself with this man who, in his opinion, was not a proper sample of the inhabitants of these happy lands, not having any advantage of birth or acquired rank, nor being eminent in shape, figure, or complexion. Cook, however, on his arrival in England was convinced of his error and doubts whether any other native would have given more general satisfaction by his behaviour among them.

'Omai', observes Captain Cook², 'has certainly a very good understanding, quick parts and honest principles etc. . . . and I have never heard that, during the whole time of his stay in England, which was two years, he ever once was disguised with wine, or ever showed an inclination to go beyond the strictest rules of moderation.

'Soon after his arrival in London, the Earl of Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty, introduced him to His Majesty at Kew when he met with a most gracious reception. . . . During his stay among us he was caressed by many of the principal nobility and did nothing to forget the esteem of any of them; but his principal patrons were the Earl of Sandwich, Mr Banks and Dr Solander. . . . It is to be observed that though Omai lived in the midst of amusements during his residence in England, his return to his native country was always in his thoughts. . . . He embarked with me in the *Resolution*, loaded with presents from his several friends and full of gratitude for the kind reception and treatment he had experienced among us.'

Cook's third voyage began in July 1776 and the account of it contains a full story of Omai's return to his home. Omai was therefore in England from July 1774 to July 1776 and during that time was fêted and entertained in many ways. I had hoped to be able to find a confirmatory record of his visit to St Thomas's Hospital but have been unsuccessful, in spite of searching through two London newspapers from July 1774 to July 1776. These were the *London Chronicle* and *Lloyd's Evening Post* and although I found many reports of Omai's activities and visits to various places, I found no mention of a visit to St Thomas's. There are numerous accounts of his activities—for instance, in April 1775 to Woolwich with Dr Solander to see the ship *Actea* launched and again in December 1774, when he visited the Mint. Fanny Burney mentions that he had just been to the House of Lords with Banks and Solander to hear the King's Speech.

In July 1774 he was presented to King George III, who asked if he had had smallpox. On being told that this disease had not been heard of in the South Seas he suggested that Omai should be inoculated and this was done. After recovery from this he went on a tour to the west of England with Lord Sandwich and Mr Banks. H C Cameron in his biography *Sir Joseph Banks*³ devotes almost a chapter to Omai and confirms that he 'became an object of intense interest in London society and he comported himself therein with a becoming gravity and decorum from which he very seldom lapsed'. He was everywhere an honoured guest.

In addition to searching through newspaper files I have made many enquiries and searches that might have provided actual confirmation of his visit to St Thomas's but without success. I still hope to find confirmatory evidence, but in the meantime there is strong evidence for accepting that such a visit formed part of the programme of 'entertainment' provided for him.

Professor Anthony Pearson in a recent number of the *Annals*⁴ has written of John Hunter and the portraits of two Cherokee Indians that hang in the College. They came to England in 1790, stayed until 1791, were sponsored by Lord Dorchester, and received a welcome similar to that enjoyed by Omai and were lavishly entertained and welcomed everywhere. The similarity to Omai's visit some 15 years before is remarkable, and Pearson comments on the prevalent cult of the concept of the 'noble savage' which had been eulogized by Rousseau. Pearson, in conversation, emphasizes that this is a recurrent theme that dates back at least to the arrival of Pocahontas in 1616.

Omai's portrait was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, by Dance, and by Hodges, who had accompanied Cook on his expedition. It was a great thrill for me to find hanging in the East Exhibition corridor at the College a portrait described as 'Polynesian (Omai)'. This is ascribed to Hodges but there is doubt about this. It is very different from the engraving by Hodges in the report of Cook's voyages. Omai faces a different way and the only similarity is that he wears a white robe. His face

is much darker and his hair is almost straight and very dark, not curly. Hodges may have done more than one portrait of Omai, but Clift calls it a 'sketch by Robert Haynes said to be by W Hodges Esq., RA'. Haynes was a resident pupil of Hunter's.

Omai's visit goes a long way to explaining how our operation scene came to be made. It is, in fact, a 'press photograph' of his visit to St Thomas's that is easily understandable and explains why he is a central figure in the front row, watching the dramatic scene on the theatre floor which the artist has taken as

the dominant theme of his picture. In fact I look upon this painting as evidence as strong as a textual reference in print in a newspaper.

References

- 1 Brock, Lord (1967) *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 40, 194.
- 2 Cook, J (1777) *Voyage towards the South Pole and round the World*. London, W Strahan and T Cadell.
- 3 Cameron, H C (1952) *Sir Joseph Banks*, pp 102-105. London, Batchworth Press.
- 4 Pearson, A A (1976) *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 58, 374.